

Baptist Church of West Chester
221 South High Street
West Chester Borough
Chester County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1191

HABS,
PA,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. PA-1191

BAPTIST CHURCH OF WEST CHESTER

Location: 221 South High Street, West Chester, Chester County, Pennsylvania.

Present Owner: Baptist Church of West Chester, 221 South High Street, West Chester, Pennsylvania.

Present Use: Church.

Statement of Significance: This Baptist Church has served the community of West Chester since 1857 and, though modified, presents a handsome edifice which retains many original elements.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Cornerstone laid July 4, 1854. Dedicated August 29 and 30, 1857. Cost was \$10,811.67.
2. Architect: Samuel Sloan and John Stewart (Partners between 1852 and 1857).
3. Original and subsequent owners: Baptist Church of West Chester.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Robert Lowry, contractor. By chance, the minister at the time had exactly the same name.
5. Original plan and construction: The original plans have not been found. The original building had a lecture room in the basement, which was in use by the service of Sunday after January 6, 1855. The floor above was the church proper and was in use two-and-a-half years later. The pulpit was on the east side. There was a baptismal font, doing "away with the necessity of going out to a mill dam to perform this solemn rite of the Christian church." See American Republican, West Chester, Pennsylvania, for December 9, 1856.
6. Alterations and additions: In 1886 a small addition was made to the south side for a baptistery and the pulpit. Reverend Charles Larkin, Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, was the architect. Chairs were put in instead of the old pews, the total cost being about \$4000. In 1899 the pulpit was changed back to the east end of the building at a cost of \$400. A Sunday School, 40' by 50', was added to the east end of the old building in the early 20th century. In 1930

the Sunday School wing was enlarged and the west front portico was added. The architect was Ralph Minick, aided by George E. Merrill. There were other changes, principally interior, bringing the cost to \$75,000. In the early 1960's a one-story addition was added to the north side of the church joining it to the Church House next to it.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Robert Lowry (same name as the contractor of the church) was a noted writer of gospel songs, including "Beulah Land," "I Need Thee Every Hour," "Shall We Gather by the River?" and others.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Print, "Baptist Church West Chester, Pa.," "Charlie C. Taylor (Del. & Publisher)," "Lith & Printed by W. H. Reese, 4th and Chest. St. Phila." Copy in the Chester County Historical Society showing the addition to the south added in 1886, but removed circa 1929.

2. Bibliography:

- a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Cooledge, H. N., Jr. "Samuel Sloan (1815-1884), Architect." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1963.

Manuscript and clipping files in the Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pennsylvania, under the heading: "West Chester. Churches--Baptist."

- b. Secondary and published sources:

Futhey, J. Smith, and Cope, Gilbert. History of Chester County, Pennsylvania. Louis H. Everts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1881.

D. Supplemental Material:

The following items pertaining to the church appeared in 19th century West Chester newspapers:

1. American Republican, West Chester, Pennsylvania, March 21, 1854:

"NOTICE TO CONTRACTORS.--Sealed proposals will be received for the erection of a Baptist house of worship, in the Borough of West Chester, until the 6th day of April next

inclusive. Plans and specifications will be exhibited on and after the 22d inst., at the house of E. P. Worrall, corner of High & Chestnut streets, in said Borough.

"E. P. WORRALL

Chairman of the Committee

"March 21-2t"

2. American Republican, West Chester, Pennsylvania, March 21, 1854:

"A NEW BAPTIST CHURCH.--By an advertisement in another column, it will be seen that the Baptists of this Borough are about to erect a new house of worship. The Congregation has not yet decided on a lot for their building. A portion of their people are favorable to the old site, while others prefer a new location."

3. American Republican, West Chester, Pennsylvania, June 13, 1854:

"SENSIBLE AT LAST.--We are rejoiced to hear that the members of the Baptist Church in this Borough, have at last abandoned the idea of erecting their new house of worship, on the old lot in Church street. There was evidently no room there to put up a proper building. Nearly every foot of ground would have been occupied, and if the adjoining ground of Mr. Smith had ever been built up, the light from the northern windows of Church, would have been almost entirely shut out. The intention now is to build on the vacant ground between Barnard and Union streets in High, the next lot south of the residence of Mr. Jno. Hodgson. It is a very desirable location, but we suggest that they take a look at the grounds around the Orthodox Meeting House, before they consent to build on a very narrow lot."

4. American Republican, West Chester, Pennsylvania, June 27, 1854:

"THE CORNER STONE of the New Baptist Church at West Chester, will be laid on Tuesday, the 4th of July, at 2 1/2 o'clock. The Rev. Dr. Dowling and Rev. J. H. Kennard, of Philadelphia, and A. S. Patton will officiate."

5. Village Record, West Chester, Pennsylvania, July 11, 1854:

"CEREMONIES INCIDENT TO THE LAYING OF THE CORNER STONE OF THE BAPTIST CHURCH. Owing to the great heat on the afternoon of the 4th, and the want of shade in the immediate vicinity of the new Baptist Meeting House, the ceremonies incident to the laying of the corner stone were held in the Court House. Had this arrangement been generally known, there is no doubt the house would have been crowded; there was, however, in

attendance a large and respectable audience, who listened with much interest to the addresses of the different speakers. The exercises were opened by an appropriate hymn--

'Behold the sure Foundation Stone
Which God in Zion lays.'

"Prayer by the Rev. Wm. Parker, formerly Pastor of the West Chester church, followed by an address by the Rev. Alfred S. Patton, congratulating the church on the success so far attending their enterprise, and the moral and elevating influence such a house would have in the community, and closed by urging those not immediately connected with the church and congregation to lend a helping hand in the completion of the edifice which would be creditable to the borough.

"Hymn by the choir:
'My country, 'tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing.'

followed by a most eloquent and appropriate address by the Rev. D. B. Cheyney, Pastor of the 11th Baptist Church of Philadelphia, urging the importance of vigilance in the maintenance of our inestimable civil and religious liberties--comparing our great and happy country to those of Europe, where those blessings were not enjoyed. His remarks were most happily chosen for the day and the occasion.

"The Rev. J. H. Kennard followed in a brief address to the Church--urging the importance of living soberly, righteously and godly in the present evil world--cherishing Christian love and regard for the other evangelical denominations, and working with them in advancing the Great Redeemer's kingdom. His address was characteristic of the man, filled with love to his Savior, and sympathizing with his fellow man. His counsel and advice fell upon the audience as from one having authority. It is to be hoped his words will be remembered by all--especially the Church.

"The following was then announced as the contents of the copper box to be deposited in the corner stone:--American Baptist Register; Annual Reports of Am. Bap. Miss. Union, Am. Bap. Home Miss. Society, Am. Bap. Pub. Society, Am. and Foreign Bible Society, Penna. Bap. State Convention, Penna. Bap. Education Society; Minutes of Philadelphia Bap. Association, 146th anniversary; Minutes of Central Union Association; Am. Bap. Almanac for 1844; catalogue of books of Am. Bap. Pub. Society; a sketch of the rise and progress of the first Baptist church of West Chester; names of the officers and members of the first Baptist church of West Chester; names of the superintendent, teachers and scholars in the Sabbath School; - Christian Chronicle and Macedonian; officers of the borough of West Chester; papers of the Borough; last Report of the Borough Finances; short history of the art of

Daguerrotyping, with the likeness of the most celebrated artist in the borough; Memorial of Baptist Martyrs; list of contributors to the building up to July 4th.

"We understand some were disappointed in not seeing the box deposited in the corner. This was not done because the brick layers were not yet ready to commence their work, and it was feared it would not be safe."

6. Register & Examiner, West Chester, Pennsylvania, January 6, 1855:

"BAPTIST CHURCH.--The Lecture room of the new Baptist Church of West Chester, will be opened for Divine Service on Sunday morning next. Sermons will be preached in the morning at 10 1/2 o'clock, and in the evening at 7, by ministering brethren from abroad. Collections will be taken up during the day to help defray the Church debt. When completed it will be decidedly the handsomest church edifice in the borough."

7. American Republican, West Chester, Pennsylvania, December 9, 1856:

"FRESCO PAINTING.--The principal room of the Baptist Church has recently been beautifully frescoed by two German artists from Reading. We had the opportunity of examining it some time since, and were greatly astonished at the fine effect produced. The ceiling and side walls are both elaborately finished, probably too much so for a room of no larger dimensions. The recess back of the pulpit is painted so as to deceive the eye entirely. One can scarcely realize that it is a flat surface. There are no pews or seats as yet in the room, the congregation still worshipping in the basement story. We were glad to see that the church is provided with a fine baptismal font suitable for immersion. This will do away with the necessity of going out to a mill dam to perform this solemn rite of the Christian church."

8. American Republican, West Chester, Pennsylvania, September 8, 1857:

"DEDICATION.--The principal room of the Baptist Church, in West Chester, was consecrated to the worship of the Lord, on Sunday last. The Rev. Mr. Patton, Rev. Mr. Parmely, and other Divines assisted in the exercises. The Church, which is now entirely completed, is a large and handsome brick edifice."

9. Daily Local News, West Chester, Pennsylvania, March 4, 1886:

"Church to be Enlarged.--At the Wednesday evening meeting of the First Baptist Church of West Chester plans were

submitted for the proposed enlargement of the building. The following is a brief detail of the change: There will be an addition built on the south side, extending about half the depth of the building. In this addition, on the second floor, it is proposed to place the pulpit, the baptistry and rooms for candidates to prepare for baptism and change their apparel after the ordinance has been administered, while on the first floor there will be a large parlor, which will be used for society meetings, and a studio for the pastor. The main auditorium will be converted into an amphitheatre, plain but neat in finish, with individual seats. In the space now occupied by the pulpit and baptistry a gallery will be erected in order to give balance to the one now in the front part of the church. There will be a pavement laid along the north side of the building to an entrance to be made on that side. The present stairways will also be made wider. The contemplated improvements will cost about \$4000, and when finished will make the interior of the building very comfortable, with a seating capacity of 800. It is expected that the work will be begun in a very short time."

10. Daily Local News, West Chester, Pennsylvania, August 27, 1886:

"Hurried Glances at the Great Change Effected by Hammer, Saw and Trowel.

"The announcement that services will be held in the main room of the First Baptist Church, of this place, on Sunday next is evidence that the extensive improvements there recently inaugurated are about completed.

"Thursday evening busy men and women were engaged therein pushing ahead the final work, and the scene was an energetic one, in which the pastor, Rev. Mr. Needham, conspicuously figured. Carpenters were engaged in placing the handsome perforated chairs in amphitheatre position upon the main floor, which work as it progressed shaped the handsome room and made it grow in coziness and attractiveness as if some magic hand was employed in the undertaking.

"The brick addition on the south side of the building is a grand feature of the structure proper and through it the main room has been changed from the old stiff plan to one of the most easy and graceful order. In this addition the pastor has his nicely-furnished study, it being on the lower floor, fronting High street. Adjoining it is a reception or waiting room quite invitingly arranged while above are two spacious preparing rooms set aside for the uses of candidates for baptism, one for ladies and the other for gentlemen, each with a spacious wardrobe and other features of comfort and accommodation. These rooms lead to the baptismal pool, which is in the alcove back of the pulpit. The arrangements

of these apartments connected with the pool are perfect. The candidate for the pool is conducted from the waiting room down a short flight of steps into the rear of the pool proper and enters the water before he or she is brought before the congregation to receive the ordinance. The retiring is of the same private character and in every way have the objectionable or unpleasant features of this ordinance of the church been put aside and the nervous person who shall ask to receive this ordinance will find the way easy and agreeable.

"The pulpit, a neat and prettily designed one, is placed upon a slight semi-circular elevation and the pastor is thereby brought in the midst of his people while teaching them the spirit of the Divine Word. A handsome chair for his comfort adorns the stand and the whole effect is very pretty. We expect the heavy curtains are to be tastefully arranged back of the pulpit and across the lower part of the pool recess, which will greatly add to the beauty and home-like surroundings of the room. Unless this is done there will be a feature wanting which will be very apparent to the congregation. Over where the pulpit formerly stood a tastefully constructed gallery has been erected capable of comfortably seating 175 persons, while the one on the west side has been remodeled to conform to the general fine appearance of the room, and will seat nearly 100 more.

"The whole floor of the main room is handsomely covered with Brussels carpet of a very pretty and serviceable pattern, while upon it are placed the easy chairs in such a manner as to impart a decidedly cheerful effect to the whole interior. The galleries are also carpeted in fine style, and in the building on the north and south sides small windows for ventilating purposes have been made. The walls have been artistically painted, and nicely conform to the decorations of the ceiling, and the profuse display of electric light jets renders the whole still more inviting. There are many additional means of ingress and egress, and in every feature the improvement is a credit not only to the people of that church but to the town.

"This hastily prepared description falls far short of doing justice to the great change now about being completed to the structure, and what we have failed to notice we trust, our readers will go and see and enjoy for themselves."

Prepared by Bart Anderson
Curator
Chester County Historical
Society
July 1958

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Although this church has been conspicuously changed by the addition of a Tuscan entrance portico in 1930, many original features remain.
2. Condition of fabric: Very good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The original church is 41' (three-bay front) by 81' (six-bay flank), two stories. This measurement does not include the modern additions to the southeast and north.
2. Foundations: Brick.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: Brick, American Bond.
4. Porches and stoops: On the front (west elevation) is a full-height portico with a denticulated pediment supported by four, wooden Tuscan columns. An oculus is centered in the pediment. Three stone steps lead up to the herringbone brick floor.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Entrance to the church is through an aluminum vestibule fitted into the doorway. The present doorway has a heavy architrave with a dentil band above the frieze. Originally, the doorway, as seen in circa 1860 lithograph (included in HABS report), had a hood molding on consoles with a plain panel below it. The present door is a twelve-panel double door. Other doors are modern circa 1930 or 1960 additions.
 - b. Windows: Above the entrance to the church, between two brick pilasters, is an arched window with wooden keystone and imposts. On either side of it are blind recessed windows, their openings filled with brick. The windows, placed between brick pilasters, are crowned with unusual pedimented hoods which project from the building at thirty degree angles. In each of the six bays on the second floor, north and south elevations of the church, are long, rectangular stained glass windows, one-over-one-light double-hung wooden sash with rectangular transoms. The first floor windows on the north and south elevation are six-over-six-light double-hung wooden sash windows.

All of the north and south elevation windows have stone sills and lintels. The windows in the southeast addition are also six-over-six-light, double-hung, wooden sash.

6. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: A low-pitched gable roof with a tin covering. The ridge is perpendicular to the street. The southeast addition has a gable roof, the northeast addition a flat roof.
- b. Cornice, eaves: The portico columns support a full entablature which extends to the beginning of the second bay on the north and south facades.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The original church consisted of two stories. The southeast addition has a basement. The first floor has a wide entrance hall with stairways on either side of it. Beyond the entrance hall is a large lecture room with Sunday School rooms behind it. To the north of the lecture hall, in the 1960 addition, are administrative offices. Above the lecture hall, on the second floor, is the church sanctuary. To the north (rear) of it are more office and Sunday School rooms.
2. Stairways: Two flights of stairs lead from the hallway to the sanctuary. Both have two runs with two landings. The stair rails do not appear to be original. In the southeast wing the two-run stairs are made of corrugated iron.
3. Flooring: Most of the original flooring has been replaced.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The shallow vaulted sanctuary ceiling has a plaster cornice. The north and south walls below the chair rail are paneled with vertical boards.
5. Doorways and doors: A double door with fifteen-light glass panels and a fanlight above it leads into the first floor lecture room. In the east end of the sanctuary on either side of the altar are two identical doors. They are six-panel double doors. The lintel of the door frame is a plain rectangular panel. Above it is a wooden screen with geometric designs pierced in it. Similar screens are located above the choir stalls at the east end of the church. Other doors in the building appear to be modern additions.
6. Special decorative features, trim, cabinet work: A wooden gallery circa 1899, with ornamental lattice work painted white, is attached to the east wall of the sanctuary. The

recessed baptismal font has an entablature frame that closely resembles the 1930 entrance to the church.

7. Hardware: All of it seems to have been replaced.
8. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: Vertical tube radiators on the north and south walls of the sanctuary.
 - b. Lighting: Nothing old remains.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The church faces west on High Street. The house shown in 1860 lithograph (included in HABS report) is now connected to the church by the 1960 addition.
2. Historic landscape design: There is no landscaping.

Prepared by Bart Anderson
Curator
Chester County Historical
Society
July 1958
and
Marion Morton
December 1975

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared as part of a cooperative survey of 100 Chester County buildings conducted by the Historic American Buildings Survey and the Chester County Historical Society between 1958 and 1962. This was the first large-scale project undertaken after the reinstatement of HABS in 1957, and it established the pattern of cooperation with state and local preservation groups which has characterized the HABS program in recent years. Written data was prepared by Bart Anderson, Curator of the Chester County Historical Society, with the assistance of the Jim Sorber and others. HABS hired local professional photographer Ned Goode to take the documentary photographs. The written material was edited and expanded in 1975 by Marian Morton working under contract with HABS.